

# Pedagogy and Protreptic in Iamblichus and Hierocles

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# Pedagogy and Protreptic in Iamblichus and Hierocles<sup>1</sup>

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The study of the Neopythagorean *Golden Verses* was the first stage in the Neoplatonic philosophical curriculum<sup>2</sup> while the principle of daily examination of conscience prescribed by the *Verses* was among the Stoic spiritual exercises as well.<sup>3</sup> In light of the centrality of the *Golden Verses* in the training of philosophers, I argue here for the protreptic nature of Hierocles' Commentary on the *Golden verses* (*Commentarius in AC*) and provide textual and structural evidence for the direct influence of Iamblichus' *Protrepticus* on it.

There are excellent recent studies on Hierocles: I. Hadot (2004) has given us a thorough analysis of his doctrinal views related to the mortality of the lower soul, the vehicle of the soul, theurgy etc. She ascertains that he was strongly influenced by Iamblichus, but that his views are post-Iamblichean; O'Meara (1989) discusses Hierocles' perspective on the History of Platonism where he is again dependent on Iamblichus. This is natural because Hierocles studied with Plutarch of Athens and imbibed from him the significance of Iamblichus's philosophy in all its manifestations.<sup>4</sup> It was during Hierocles' time with Plutarch of Athens that many of Iamblichus' Pythagorean concerns were transmitted to him.<sup>5</sup>

Scholars who have studied Hierocles closely so far (I. Hadot, O'Meara, Schibli) have not mentioned or considered Hierocles' commentary as a form of protreptic. I view this as a blind spot in the study of Hierocles' *Commentarius in AC*. O'Meara explicitly rejects any dependence of Hierocles upon Iamblichus' partial commentary on the *Golden Verses* in ch. 3 of his *Protrepticus*. O'Meara comments that in Iamblichus "there is only a selection from the *Golden Verses*, and interpretation is kept to a bare moralizing minimum. On the other hand, Hierocles' use of the

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<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful to Svetla Slaveva-Griffin, Anne Sheppard, Harold Tarrant, and the anonymous reviewer, who helped me formulate the paper's argument more clearly and pointed me to an overlooked bibliography on the topic.

<sup>2</sup> Hadot (2002) 186 and Hadot (1995) 285ff.

<sup>3</sup> Hadot (2002) 200 and Hadot (1995) 307.

<sup>4</sup> Schibli (2002) 6

<sup>5</sup> Schibli (2002) 12

*Golden Verses* as the text of his Commentary is more extensive and his exegesis much more developed.” He concludes, “These differences may help explain why Hierocles does not seem to have used *Protrepticus* ch. 3 as a source for his exegesis, *despite verbal parallels and similarities in the general tendency of interpretation.*”<sup>6</sup>

I disagree with O’Meara’s conclusion and in the second half of the paper, I explain why Iamblichus’ commentary on the *Golden Verses* is incomplete and minimalistic. As Markovich has recently noted, Iamblichus’ *Protrepticus* of which his short commentary on the *Golden Verses* is only a small part, resembles an anthology.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it may have been used as a manual with illustrative templates for different modes of writing a protreptic. I argue that even if Iamblichus’ *Protreptic* was not the only source for Hierocles, it was a direct and immediate influence because Hierocles’ *Commentarius* imitates many of the protreptic templates included in Iamblichus’ *Protrepticus*. Of course, due to the ubiquity of the protreptic genre in antiquity, both Iamblichus and Hierocles had a rich reservoir of protreptic *topoi* to draw upon as discussed below.

### I. Hierocles’ *Commentarius in AC* as protreptic

Very few specimens of the protreptic genre are extant today,<sup>8</sup> but one feature that seems to have been common to it is that the exhortation aims at conversion to philosophy in general and not to a specific philosophical school of thought. This is how Iamblichus incorporates this principle into his *Protrepticus*:

Jamblique, *Protr.* 1. Des Places (1989) 41.3-7 in Thom (2018) 72, italics mine.

For this will directly exhort to philosophy and to *practicing philosophy itself as a whole, according to whatever tradition, with none of the philosophical sects being totally preferred, but with all of them being commended generally* and generically and highly commended among human activities. (tr. Thom)

Likewise, Augustine says in his *Confessions* about the now-lost Ciceronian *Hortensius*, which was based upon Aristotle’s *Protrepticus*: “But the one thing that delighted me in Cicero’s exhortation was that I

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<sup>6</sup> O’Meara (1989) 116, italics mine.

<sup>7</sup> Markovich (2022) 207.

<sup>8</sup> See the comprehensive study of the genre by Markovich (2022).

should love, and seek, and win, and hold, and embrace, *not this or that philosophical school, but Wisdom itself, whatever it might be.*"<sup>9</sup>

Hierocles' proem to his *Commentarius in AC* reiterates this topos. Although Hierocles is writing a narrowly focused commentary on the Pythagorean *Golden Verses*, he says that these verses are directed to the whole of philosophy, the universal doctrines of all philosophy:

Hierocles, *Commentarius in AC*, Proem 2, italics mine

Therefore to acquire this science that will render us pure and perfect we need certain briefly defined rules, technical aphorisms, as it were, so that we may attain in an orderly and well-arranged fashion the perfection of our happiness. Of such rules that are directed *to the whole of philosophy* I would with good reason rank among the first the Pythagorean verses, the so-called 'golden' verses. For these encompass *the universal doctrines of all philosophy, both practical and contemplative*, through which one may acquire truth and virtue, regain one's purity, succeed in obtaining likeness to god... (tr. Schibli)

And again at the conclusion of his commentary he says:

Hierocles, *Commentarius in AC* 27.11, italics mine

These verses are nothing other than *the most perfect impress of philosophy, a compendium of its more central doctrines, and a basic pedagogical exposition transcribed by those who have already gone up the divine path for those who come after*. You could in truth say they are the most beautiful token of human nobility and the memorial of not just one of the Pythagoreans, but *of the entire sacred assembly*. (tr. Schibli)

Since the *Golden Verses* were the first text that beginners encountered in Hierocles' school in Alexandria, he begins his commentary in the style of isagoge<sup>10</sup> by defining what philosophy is:

Hierocles, *Commentarius in AC*, Proem 1

Philosophy is a purification and perfection of human life: a purification from our irrational, material nature and the mortal form of the body, a perfection by the recovery of our proper happiness, leading to divine likeness. (tr. Schibli)

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<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* 3.4.8. tr. F. J. Sheed.

<sup>10</sup> The kinship between prolegomena (*isagoge*) and protreptic is thoroughly discussed by Van der Meeren (2018).

There are countless passages in the commentary that define what philosophy is along with exhortations like “let us, we must, we should, we ought.” Hortatory subjunctives are very common throughout the work. For example:

Hierocles, *Commentarius in AC*, 14.11, italics mine.

When we have fallen from being good, *let us* at least get hold of becoming good and with well-considered regret accept being set right with the divine. This repentance is the *beginning of philosophy*; it is also the flight from thoughtless deeds and words, and the first provision for a life free from regret. (tr. Schibli)

Even where explicit hortatory flags are lacking, the ethos of the commentary is protreptic, permeated with protreptic urging of its audience to change attitudes and behaviors and adopt a way of life in conformity with philosophy. Hierocles explains the aim of the *Golden Verses* thus:

Hierocles, *Commentarius in AC*, Proem 4

The aim and arrangement of the verses is precisely this, to impress upon the students a philosophic character before the other readings. (tr. Schibli)

Hierocles says this about the *Golden Verses* because the aim of his commentary on them is the same. The verses are protreptic, and so is his commentary. Just as Iamblichus in his *Protrepticus* ch. 3, Hierocles uses the authoritative text of the *Golden Verses* as a springboard for crafting his protreptic tailored to his audience’s needs. When he discusses the most appropriate way of honoring divine beings (heroes, daimons, sages, philosophical teachers etc), he switches into protreptic mode, questioning the custom of honoring them with external offerings alone:

Hierocles, *Commentarius in AC* 4.4, italics mine.

They have traversed this path and do not begrudge us a share of it, but instead they have struggled to preserve it, just like some undying, paternal inheritance for their descendants, by setting down in writing for the common good the basic principles of the virtues and the standards of truth. *To obey these and to live accordingly* is for them a more genuine honor than if someone were to spend on them the most extravagant libations and expensive funerary offerings. (tr. Schibli)

While commenting on the *Golden Verses* and relying on their time-tested authority, Hierocles also weaves through his commentary quotes

from a wide range of philosophers, most prominently Plato, Aristotle and Epictetus. He also alludes to themes found in Plotinus. The text abounds in Stoic themes and language, e.g., the expression *καθ' ἡμῖν*. Thus, the commentary resembles a cento. In the following quote, he uses a compressed version of Plato, *Crito* 46b combined with a reference to Stoic 'right reason' *ὀρθὸς λόγος*:

Hierocles, *Commentarius in AC* 14.13

Let us use right reasoning as our guide in everything and fulfil the Socratic saying that I am able to obey nothing that belongs to me except the reason that on reflection appears to me to be right. (tr. Schibli)

Prior to that, he had quoted Homer. This cento of sources welded together to make a protreptic point will be important in the second half of the paper, where we discuss Iamblichus' protreptic templates. Hierocles ends his Commentary on a pronounced protreptic note. He describes the Pythagoreans' way of using the poems and then exhorts his audience to follow their custom:

Hierocles, *Commentarius in AC* 27.12, italics mine.

It was also their custom both upon rising in the morning to listen to these verses just as though to Pythagorean precepts, when one of them would recite them aloud, and also in the evening before going to sleep, so that by the continual engagement with such texts they might show forth that the doctrines were living in them. *It is surely right that we do so as well, in order that after some time we may come to perceive the benefit they bring us.* (tr. Schibli)

So, the purpose of the Commentary was to inspire the audience to commit or recommit to the advice given in the Verses. That this was done and practiced in earlier centuries is clear from Epictetus and Galen,<sup>11</sup> who reference the memorization and daily recital of the Verses as part of a spiritual discipline.

## II Hierocles' dependence on Iamblichus' *Protrepticus*.

Hierocles was most likely directly influenced by ch 3 in Iamblichus' *Protreptic* in choosing to introduce his students to philosophy through a commentary on the *Golden Verses*. Iamblichus' *Protrepticus* is the first

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<sup>11</sup> Epictetus, *Discourses* III.10.4 and Galen 1964 v. 5, p. 30 *On the Passions and Errors of the Soul*. Cf. also Hadot (2002) 200.

known text where the *Golden Verses* are explicitly integrated into a work that belongs to the protreptic genre and placed at the beginning of the Neoplatonic curriculum. It was a protreptic anthology,<sup>12</sup> which, I suggest, may have served as a manual or model for other writers of protreptics, including Hierocles, on how to introduce beginners to philosophy.

A careful examination of the structure of Iamblichus' *Protrepticus*<sup>13</sup> (see the figure below) is revealing. We remind the reader that Iamblichus wrote a ten-volume work *On the Pythagorean School* of which only 4 books survive: the first book was *On the Pythagorean Life* and the second was his *Protrepticus* which concerns us here.<sup>14</sup> In his *Protrepticus*, "instead of simply providing a protreptic to philosophy, Iamblichus reflects on the material to be used in such a protreptic... *He also provides examples of different types of material to be used in a protreptic.*"<sup>15</sup> I believe that, in fact, we are dealing with a manual comprising various templates or models designed to give future teachers and writers of protreptic ideas about how to generate their own.

This is very much in keeping with the important role Iamblichus played in laying down the foundations of the Platonic curriculum. In his *Protrepticus* he writes both with a pedagogical aim of providing a menu of samples for teachers, modeling the styles and materials one can use in a protreptic, and also with an aim to offer protreptic proper directed to the beginners in his own school. The work is not one cohesive and unified whole but consists of various unrelated samples intended to meet the diverse needs of beginners depending on background and intellectual receptivity. In a key passage in ch. 1 of his *Protrepticus*, Iamblichus offers three approaches to protreptic: 1. common and popular; 2. intermediate, and 3. esoteric and secret. Within these three modes, I discern 7 different templates. Hierocles implemented a number of them.

The most basic template (1) in the figure below consists of gnomic sentences distilled from various sources. Another template (2) demonstrates how a commentary on the *Golden Verses* can strengthen and clarify their protreptic force. Template 3 offers esoteric and scientific exhortations through excerpts from Ps.-Archytas. Template 4

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<sup>12</sup> as Markovich (2022) 207ff. has convincingly shown.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Thom (2018) 74-75.

<sup>14</sup> The other two preserved volumes are *On General Mathematical Science* and *Nicomachus' Introduction to Arithmetic*.

<sup>15</sup> Thom (2018) pp. 72 and 82

illustrates the repurposing of excerpts from one of the most influential protreptics in antiquity – the one by Aristotle, now lost. Template 5 is in the cento-style and includes simplified passages from various Platonic dialogues, mostly the *Phaedo*, the protreptic elements in which are numerous.<sup>16</sup> Template 6 illustrates how to discuss the relevance of the philosophical way of life to a person with economic and political responsibilities. Template 7 circles back to Pythagorean material, illustrating how to incorporate *symbola* into a protreptic.

**Figure: Protreptic templates in Iamblichus' *Protrepticus***

<p>1. Common and popular mode<sup>17</sup>  <b>Template 1</b> ch. 2 -- examples of sayings (<i>gnômai</i>) that convert to philosophy in general  <b>Template 2</b> ch 3 -- partial commentary on <i>Golden Verses</i> 45-71.</p> <p>2. Intermediate mode<sup>18</sup>  <b>Template 3</b> ch 4 Excerpts from Ps.-Archytas <i>On Wisdom</i> – ‘esoteric and scientific exhortations’  <b>Template 4</b> ch 5-12 Quotes probably from Aristotle’s <i>Protrepticus</i>.<sup>19</sup>  <b>Template 5</b> ch 13-19 Cento of paraphrases from various Platonic dialogues: <i>Phaedo</i>, <i>Republic</i>, <i>Gorgias</i>, <i>Theaetetus</i>, <i>Menexenus</i>, <i>Leges</i>.  <b>Template 6</b> ch 20 <i>Anonymus Iamblichi</i> 5<sup>th</sup> BCE whom Iamblichus accessed through an intermediary demonstrating the relevance of the philosophical life to one’s economic and political life.</p> <p>3. Symbolic and ineffable mode<sup>20</sup>  <b>Template 7</b> ch 21 discussion of Pythagorean <i>akousmata</i> or <i>symbola</i> as an example of exhortation through ‘technical demonstrations.’</p>
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I suggest that Hierocles was familiar with Iamblichus' *Protrepticus* and chose template 2 for his commentary on the *Golden Verses*. However, his commentary contains parallels to other parts of Iamblichus' *Protreptic* as well. *Commentarius in AC* 14.13 discussed in part I is just one example of the cento technique that Hierocles uses consistently

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Markus (2017)

<sup>17</sup> κοινός και δημόδης τρόπος, Iamblichus, *Protr.* 1, p. 41.7-8

<sup>18</sup> μῆση τις μέθοδος Iamblichus, *Protr.* 1, p. 41.9

<sup>19</sup> see Hutchinson and Johnson (2018)

<sup>20</sup> ἀλλότρια και ἀπόρρητα Iamblichus, *Protr.* 1, p. 41.23



throughout his commentary. Iamblichus demonstrates it in template 5 of his *Protrepticus*. Finally, taking his cue from Iamblichus who discussed the Pythagorean *symbola* at the end of his *Protrepticus* (Template 7), Hierocles, too, discusses *symbola* towards the end of his commentary, although not in the Pythagorean, but in the theurgic sense.

The following *Golden Verses* referring to dietary taboos are an example of that approach: “avoid the foods of which we spoke, in purifications and in the deliverance of the soul.”<sup>21</sup> Since these verses are cryptic, Hierocles viewed them as a *symbolon*, i.e. containing a hidden meaning calling for a deeper allegorical interpretation. In the Chaldean tradition, *symbola* designated the devices of theurgy, so Hierocles interpreted the verses in a theurgic sense as referring to the purification of the luminous body:

Hierocles, *Commentarius in AC* 26.4

Surely one who is not ignorant of the Pythagorean symbols can be instructed from the present verses as follows, that along with the practice of virtue and the recovery of truth we should also pay attention to purity in regard to our luminous body, which the Oracles also call 'the fine vehicle of the soul.' (tr. Schibli)

Just as Iamblichus used *symbola* in template 7 at the end of his *Protrepticus*, Hierocles likewise focuses on these symbolic admonitions towards the end of his Commentary:

Hierocles, *Commentarius in AC* 26. 14

With symbolic admonitions one is bound to keep both their apparent and their inner meaning, for the continuous observance of the obvious leads to the successful practice of greater matters. (tr. Schibli)

To see the protreptic elements does not impede mining Hierocles' commentary for philosophical doctrines, which is necessary because “this commentary is our major source for the philosophy of Hierocles.”<sup>22</sup> Teachings (dogmata) and protreptic are inseparable. For example, the protreptic side of the Platonic dialogues does not negate the fact that these dialogues are packed with philosophical arguments and claims.<sup>23</sup> If part of the purpose of the dialogues was to convert people to

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<sup>21</sup> *AC* 67-8, tr. Schibli (2002) 308

<sup>22</sup> Thom (2018) 22, echoing Praechter

<sup>23</sup> Gerson (2002) 228

philosophy, giving good reasons to do so adds to their protreptic power. Without those reasons, they would be a piece of propaganda.

As we learn from Damascius, Hierocles was a fine Neoplatonic teacher, “but lacking precision with regard to philosophical notions.”<sup>24</sup> This lack of philosophical precision may be due to the fact that his only complete extant work, his commentary was protreptic in nature and his overall philosophical output was more pedagogical than theoretical.

Two other commentaries on the *Golden Verses* are preserved only in Arabic. One is attributed to Iamblichus<sup>25</sup> and the other to Proclus.<sup>26</sup> The one under Iamblichus’ name is very general. The Proclean, on the other hand, does appear to go back to a Neopythagorean source.<sup>27</sup> All this suggests a more widespread influence of Iamblichus’ Pythagorizing program embodied in his work *On the Pythagorean School* of which his *Protrepticus* comprises volume two. So Hierocles was not the only Neoplatonic teacher to benefit from this influence. The unknown Neoplatonists who authored the Greek version of the Arabic commentaries on the *Golden Verses* lived after Iamblichus, and they too may have been influenced by chapter 3 of Iamblichus’ *Protrepticus* where the Syrian philosopher models how to use the *Golden Verses* as a protreptic. We do not know of commentaries on the *Golden Verses* earlier than Iamblichus.

## Conclusion

The value of Iamblichus’ *Protrepticus* for understanding the context of Hierocles’ Commentary is undisputed: “Iamblichean Pythagoreanism provides a context for explaining why a Neoplatonic teacher of the late fourth/early fifth century would choose, as a way of initiating beginners to philosophy to comment on the Pythagorean *Golden Verses*”<sup>28</sup> Hierocles himself likely introduced his students to philosophy through his own commentary on the *Golden Verses*. However, I hope to have shown that we do not need to uphold O’Meara’s caution when he states that “the Commentary does not depend on [Iamblichus’] *On Pythagoreanism* as its immediate source.”<sup>29</sup> As discussed above,

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<sup>24</sup> Damascius (1999) fr. 45B

<sup>25</sup> Daiber (1995)

<sup>26</sup> Linley (1984)

<sup>27</sup> Izdebska (2016)

<sup>28</sup> O’Meara (1989)118

<sup>29</sup> O’Meara (1989) 118

Hierocles' *Commentarius in AC* exhibits all the features of a protreptic while functioning also as an isagoge to Platonic philosophy. Iamblichus' *Protreptic* may not be the sole and only source for Hierocles, but pace O'Meara, I believe it was a direct and immediate source.

Hierocles produced an expanded version of what Iamblichus modeled in ch 3 of his *Protrepticus* and also used other templates from the same work in shaping his commentary, which exhibits the features of an isagoge and a protreptic aligned with those templates. After all, didn't Proclus' commentary on Plato's *Alcibiades* also have the features of both isagoge and protreptic, which is appropriate for a commentary on a dialogue that came first in the Platonic curriculum according to the sequence laid down by Iamblichus?

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